



# The Causes and Countermeasures of Job Burnout of Senior High School Teachers in China

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## Abstract

Job burnout mainly occurs in the service industry and the teacher is one of the high-risk groups. Because of high intensity of workload, teachers' job burnout is a state of exhaustion, including emotional exhaustion, deindividuation and low sense of achievement. Teachers' job burnout not only affects teachers' health, but also will directly pass the negative effect to the students. In order to guarantee the quality of senior high school education, it is necessary to understand teachers' job burnout, explore its causes and think about its positive countermeasures.

**Key words:** Teachers' job burnout; Senior high school; Countermeasure

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## INTRODUCTION

Freudenberger proposed the job burnout in 1974 at the first time. Job burnout is a kind of response when the teacher can't deal with the work stress very well and suffer from a state of exhaustion in the emotion, attitude and behavior under high pressure in a long term. Furthermore, the symptoms of job burnout include low job satisfaction, loss of interest and emotional indifference, etc.. W. MC. Guire, the chairman of the American Education Association (NEA) once said in 1979, "the true feeling of the burnout is hitting countless teachers who are warmhearted, has

ideals and is happy to give. Even some teachers gradually give up their work." In addition, Dworkin, an American scholar, once said in 1987, "the teacher's students are the ultimate victims, no matter the teachers' job burnout brings what kind of consequences to the teacher and the school organization." So, it is the need of reality and the social responsibility to pay attention to the growth of teachers and the current situation of teachers' job burnout.

## 1. THE CONCEPT OF TEACHERS' JOB BURNOUT AND ITS PERFORMANCE

Maslach is one of the first scholars to study the job burnout systematically. She thinks that job burnout is people's behavioral response under continuous and long-term pressure. In 1981, Peters defined job burnout as the exhaustion of one's psychology, physiology and emotional resources; its main characteristics were as follows: exhaustion, indifference, disillusionment and frustration. At present, most of the domestic scholars think that teachers' job burnout is the structural deviation of these elements, like the work attitude, work enthusiasm, self-development and getting along with others, etc. when teachers work under the high pressure for a long time.

In 1981, the psychologist Maslach and others defined that job burnout is a state of mind which is composed of three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, deindividuation and low sense of achievement. What's more, emotional exhaustion is the core element of job burnout. When experiencing job burnout, senior high school teachers have the following three typical psychology or behaviors:

### 1.1 Emotional Exhaustion

Senior high school teachers who are in a state of job burnout often show the feeling of fatigue and suffer from the insomnia caused by high pressure. Additionally, the teacher is emotional irritability, low level of tolerance, lack of enthusiasm and vigor, and full of helplessness.

## 1.2 Deindividuation

It refers to some negative and indifferent behaviors under a state of emotional exhaustion for a long time. The teacher is indifferent to his students and lacks of enough patience and love to the students who fall behind and have some behavioral problems.

## 1.3 Low Sense of Achievement

Students' scores directly affect the evaluation to the teacher from the students, parents, school and the society. Moreover, the low assessment will cause teachers' low sense of achievement; many teachers will have a strong sense of inferiority and sense of failure, which are called the scholarly powerlessness by the social psychologist.

Besides the three dimensions above, Chinese scholars, Wang Fang and Xu Yan study that job burnout of senior high school teachers also includes the dimension of the intellectual burnout. Because teachers couldn't adapt to the rapid change of the society and the rapid update of knowledge, the teacher's knowledge has dried up, their ability is decreasing when coping with the students' problems and when they studying further. In a survey of 528 primary and secondary school teachers, Chinese scholars, Liu and Wang (2004) find that there is significant correlation between job burnout of primary and secondary school teachers and their psychological health. Furthermore, the three dimensions of job burnout have prediction effect on psychological health, and the level of the emotional exhaustion has the strongest prediction.

## 2. THE CAUSES OF JOB BURNOUT OF SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS

### 2.1 Objective Causes

Teachers' job burnout is not an instant response for a particular event, but a progressive and low-intensity emotional reaction under the work pressure over a long period of time. Research shows that the causes of teachers' job burnout are complicated, and the author tries to analyze this issue mainly from two aspects: the subjective and objective causes.

#### 2.1.1 Occupational Causes

The extensive property of the space and time continuity of teachers' work are the primary causes for teachers' job burnout. The extensive property of the space of teachers' work shows in the family visit and organization of extracurricular activities; the time continuity of teachers' work shows in the preparation for lessons, homework correcting, self-study at night and communication with students and parents, etc. Due to those heavy teaching task, teachers' daily working time greatly surpasses other occupations. When teachers are always under high workload, they are susceptible to suffer from the fatigue in emotion and psychology. A survey data shows that teachers' average working hours per day are 9.67 hours,

1.67 hours longer than other general occupations; even teachers' average working hours per day in the senior year are up to 12 hours.

The evaluation of the oneness for teachers' work is the core factor of job burnout. Although there are various ways to evaluate students, examination results almost become the only standard to evaluate teachers work, especially senior high school teachers' work under the existing educational system. Usually, teachers' devotion to students isn't always directly proportional to students' examination results. So, when teachers couldn't get other people's approval for a long time, their job burnout will be further strengthened.

Teachers' role conflict and role ambiguity are the catalyst to enhance the job burnout. The teacher is a special social profession with a variety of social roles. Teachers' role conflict appears when the teacher is in a conflict situation but is expected to do what the role requires him to do. Teachers' role ambiguity means the teacher isn't qualified for the work owing to lack of clear understanding of teachers' position, rights and obligations, etc. In a survey of 584 primary and secondary school teachers, Chinese scholar, Li Dongmei, finds that teachers' role conflict and role ambiguity are positively correlated with job burnout, and role ambiguity is an important predictor variable of job satisfaction.

#### 2.1.2 Social Causes

The society has high expectation for teachers. The teachers are a model for others and are known as the engineer of the human souls. The school put the pressure, whether students can be admitted to famous universities, on teachers. In fact, teachers just enjoy low salary, poor economic benefits and low social status, which is very different from the social atmosphere of valuing education. So teachers are easy to have psychological imbalance and suffer from the job burnout.

Educational reform puts forward higher requirements to teachers. A new round of curriculum reform of elementary education brings teachers new challenges. It requires teachers to have a new awareness, namely the awareness of students' comprehensive development, awareness of students' autonomic learning, developmental awareness of curriculum evaluation, etc. So teachers are demanded to learn how to deal with many new problems and conflicts in teaching implementation. These new pressures make teachers, especially the middle-aged teachers, exhausted and make them be tired of their work.

#### 2.1.3 Causes of School Organization

School management lacks of humanistic concern for teachers. The senior high school generally carries on the rigid management and lacks of attention to teachers' internal need. For example, school will deduct teachers' money when teachers miss a class, are late for class, even ask for sick leave. For another example, nowadays, the school put students' safety and school achievement in the

first place; once teachers don't do those two aspects very well, teachers' all work performance will be a veto. Under such high pressure management, teachers' job burnout is inevitable.

The school's introduction of competition mechanism has overt pressure on teachers. In senior high school, the phenomena of evaluating students by scores and evaluating teachers by enrolment rate are widespread in the background of exam-oriented education. Meanwhile, in order to arouse teachers' work enthusiasm, many schools introduce the competitive mechanism, for instance, the school sets the three rates (pass rate, excellent rate and enrolment rate) as evaluation standard for teachers' promotion. Besides, the school proposes some hard targets (submitting a certain number of papers, declaring a certain number of subjects, organizing students to participate in the competition and winning the prize, etc.) to greatly kill teachers' subjective initiative. Even, there exists vicious competition inside the school and the school lacks of cohesion. Thus, teachers feel very lonely because of no support from other teachers. The competition mechanism above is equal to the standardization management in the factory, which can depress teachers' emotion.

#### **2.1.4 Students Causes**

A opinion poll by the American Education Association (NEA) in 1979 found that three-quarters of surveyed teachers believed that discipline had a great influence on the efficiency of their teaching, and the difficulty of students management had become the main factor of teachers' stress and job burnout. With the development of society, students' problem behaviors are also ever-increasing. Thus teachers must spend much time and energy dealing with those problems, which undoubtedly contributes to the appearance of teachers' job burnout. In 1992, Friedman and Farber pointed out in the report that students' misbehavior, indifferent attitude and lack of enthusiasm for learning were easy to make teachers suffer from job burnout.

### **2.2 Subjective Causes**

#### **2.2.1 A Specific Personality Trait Is Easy to Cause Teachers' Job Burnout**

Studies show that personality trait is also an important factor to affect job burnout. The Five-Factor Model covers the five dimensions of personality traits: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness. For instance, neuroticism can lead to the increase of emotional exhaustion and deindividuation, and the decrease of sense of achievement. While the other four dimensions can reduce the degree of deindividuation and improve sense of achievement. Meanwhile, extraversion and agreeableness can reduce the degree of emotional exhaustion. Psychological research shows that because

the people with type A personality traits usually show a strong sense of achievement and competition, impatience and rough words, etc. they are more likely to suffer from job burnout than other types of people.

#### **2.2.2 Teachers' Teaching Efficacy Is Closely Related to Job Burnout**

Teachers' teaching efficacy is the subjective judgment on their own ability to influence students' learning behaviors and learning scores. Actually, teachers' teaching efficacy can predict the degree of teachers' job burnout. Teachers with low level of teaching efficacy have high degree of job burnout, and the pressure from the job burnout is easy to cause teachers' resignation and vice versa. Yang Xiuyu proposed that the teacher with high self-esteem, positive self-concept and high level of self-efficacy, isn't easy to suffer from job burnout in terms of teachers' ability and beliefs.

## **3. THE COUNTERMEASURES OF JOB BURNOUT OF SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS**

### **3.1 The Society Should Create Good Supportive Atmosphere and Help Teachers Solve Problems**

#### **3.1.1 People Should Have Reasonable Expectation for Teachers**

Vroom's expectancy theory tells us that the performance depends on whether people have a reasonable expectation for the target. One important cause for teachers' pressure is the high expectation from the society. People thinks the teacher is the most noble profession in the sun and is the engineer of the human souls. Even the teacher is regarded as the omnipotent god without desires. If people have a reasonable expectation for teachers, it can improve teachers' job performance. However, parents expect universal education and universal school. Once the school and the teacher can't realize their expectations, they will pay critical attention to teachers. So, teachers not only experience the work fatigue, but also the bitterness of being wronged. Gradually, teachers' low sense of achievement results in job burnout. We should guide people to have a correct understanding of teachers: from the omnipotent god to ordinary people.

#### **3.1.2 The Society Should Create Public Trust on Teachers and Form the Social Atmosphere of Respecting Teachers and Valuing Education**

Some researches show that the teacher is a lonely profession and lack of social support is highly correlated with job burnout. Thus public trust has a profound impact on career choice and job performance. In an atmosphere of public trust, the teacher and school will show great confidence and motivation. Department of education administration and the news media should guide the

public to have a correct understanding of the education of senior high school.

### **3.1.3. Teachers' Workload Should Be Reduced and Their Normal Rest Time and Holiday Should Be Guaranteed**

Except teaching for students' good grades, teachers have many other occupation-related tasks, such as teachers should educate students to ensure that students observe law and discipline, it's required to study further qualification and teachers must have command of English and computer for promotion, etc.. In addition, the ministry of education recently requires that teachers must accept no less than 72 hours of continuing education each year, which will increase teachers' job stress and psychological burden. Education department should adopt strict supervision to guarantee teachers' normal working hours; it should prevent certain senior high school overworking to increase their workload and occupy teachers' rest time. Meanwhile, some measures should be introduced to solve the problem of teachers' overwork, such as controlling the number of students, adopting flexible office system and canceling various formalistic inspection and assessment, etc. In this way, teachers can work in a relatively relaxing environment and possess plenty of time and energy to think about the educational problems.

## **3.2 The School Should Update the Management Philosophy and Perfect the Management System**

### **3.2.1 The School Should Advocate the New Management Mode: Humanistic Management**

The school should encourage each teacher to participate in school management to show the teacher's subject consciousness, subject position and personal ability. Meanwhile, the school should be the stage of teachers' growth and innovation; the school should provide teachers with more opportunities to participate in school's decision, such as the opening of headmaster mailbox, teachers' congress and teachers' union, etc. which can make teachers have stronger sense of responsibility and sense of belonging.

### **3.2.2 The School Should Strengthen the Interpersonal Communication**

Interpersonal communication of the school mainly includes communication between school administrators and teachers, between teachers, and between teachers and students. Firstly, school administrators should strengthen the communication with teachers, endeavour to ensure teachers' interests and solve teachers' worries; secondly, with effective communication, teachers should be good at cooperation and eliminate the vicious competition to create a harmonious relationship with each other; thirdly, the relationship between teachers and students is the main relationship in education, so teachers should walk into students and move them with love to establish the harmonious relationship between them. Moreover, certain

study found that the information support, practice support and emotional support from colleagues could enhance teachers' control on their work, which could reduce the level of stress and deindividuation, and to improve the sense of achievement and work performance. Meanwhile, teachers' unpleasant emotion will invisibly affect students, especially the middle school students, who are at puberty with highly plasticity. Thus harmonious relationship between teachers and students not only can establish teachers' authority, but also can promote students' healthy growth.

### **3.2.3 The School Should Focus on the Need of Teachers' Group and Their Psychological Changes**

The school should provide teachers with both emotional and material support and carry on the plan of work-life balance to solve teachers' various worries. To begin with, the school should solve teachers' basic need, such as housing problem, welfare, education of their children and title assessment, etc. In addition, the school should know more about teachers' emotional need in different periods by establishing teachers' psychological evaluation system, which can help find problems and solve them in a timely manner. Only in this way, can teachers realize their own value in the atmosphere of social care and they can devote themselves to their work wholeheartedly.

### **3.2.4 The School's Development Should Be Closely Associated With the Teacher's Own Development**

The school should understand one's own positioning and development ideas, and associate school's development with each teacher's self-growth. For instance, the school could take advantage of some teachers' speciality to open some elective courses or school-based curriculum. In this way, not only can be the school highlight its characteristics, but also teachers can realize self-worth.

## **3.3 The Teacher Should Focus on Personal Psychological Adjustment to Prevent Job Burnout**

### **3.3.1 Teachers Should Set Up the Correct Occupational Faith**

Certain scholar once said that the faith for a particular occupation was the best antidote to job burnout. Setting up the correct occupational faith can motivate teachers to reflect on themselves and find path to realize their self-worth with great enthusiasm. Therefore, correct educational concept and teachers' faith, such as selfless love and great tolerance to students, are crucial to the prevention of teachers' job burnout.

### **3.3.2 Teachers Should Have One's Own Reasonable Career Planning and Form Unique Teaching Style**

The teacher shouldn't be much too strict to oneself and should set up reasonable target. Teachers should try to find excitement in work to stimulate their great passion. Because losing oneself in the work is easy to result in boredom, the teacher should also pay attention to



form unique teaching style and explore new theoretical achievement when cultivating students. By doing so, it will greatly enhance the teacher's sense of achievement and the value of life.

### 3.3.3 Teachers Should Focus on Their Own Psychological Health, Learn to Prevent and Solve the Problems of Job Burnout

Teachers should treat some educational problems reasonably, such as poor work performance, students' bad behaviours and failure in assessment, etc. When facing the problems above, the teacher shouldn't undermine his worth and add much pressure to himself. What teachers should do to be to give vent to emotion rationally. Teachers should learn how to prevent and solve the problems of job burnout in time. A research shows that positive affirmation and colorful cultural life are good for emotional adjustment. Thus, the teacher should learn to be proud of oneself and often participate in some activities good for physical and mental health, such as listening to music and painting.

## CONCLUSION

Teachers' job burnout is closely associated with the quality of education. For teachers' teaching and students' learning, we should further study teachers' job burnout and find out the prevention countermeasures. Furthermore, teachers should be aware of that job burnout not only occurs just once and it may happen in the work from time to time. If teachers can learn to identify the symptoms of job burnout and solve it timely before the expansion of its harm, teachers don't need a long recovery period and the teaching isn't greatly affected. At last, job burnout is not only the teacher's personal problem, and it's a problem under the comprehensive causes. Thus it needs joint efforts from all sectors of society to solve teacher's job burnout effectively.

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